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RUEHLH/AMCONSUL LAHORE PRIORITY 2672  
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RHEHAAA/NSC WASHINGTON DC PRIORITY  
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 KARACHI 000074

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 03/06/2019

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PK](#)

SUBJECT: SINDH - MQM HOLDS RALLY TO SUPPORT PPP, OFFER  
ASSISTANCE TO PML-N

REF: ISLAMABAD 415

Classified By: CLASSIFIED BY CONSUL GENERAL STEPHEN FAKAN FOR REASONS 1  
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11. (C) Summary: The Muttahida Quami Movement (MQM) held a large rally in Karachi on March 1, in an apparent show of solidarity with Pakistan People's Party (PPP) anger over damage to Benazir Bhutto's Rawalpindi shrine and burning of her photos by supporters of Nawaz Sharif's Pakistan Muslim League (PML-N) political party in response to a February 25 Supreme Court ruling disqualifying Nawaz Sharif and his brother Shahbaz Sharif from holding public office. MQM leader Altaf Hussain told a crowd ) via telephone - estimated at around 50,000 to 60,000, that his party stood ready to help PML-N file an appeal to a Supreme Court ruling that disqualified Sharif and his brother from holding public office. A MQM Member of the National Assembly (MNA) laid out possible solutions to the crisis and assured Karachi CG that his party did not intend to disrupt a March 12 lawyer's march planned to begin in Karachi. End summary.

PPP Joins MQM Rally  
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12. (SBU) On March 1, the Muttahida Quami Movement (MQM) political party staged a massive rally in Karachi to protest damage to Benazir Bhutto's shrine and burning of her photos in Rawalpindi on February 26 by supporters of the Pakistan Muslim League ) Nawaz (PML-N) party. The actions took place during protests over the February 25 Supreme Court disqualification from holding public office of PML-N leader Nawaz Sharif and his brother, Punjab Chief Minister Shahbaz Sherif (reftel). Pakistan People's Party (PPP) leaders cancelled their own planned rally and joined MQM officials. Independent estimates of the crowd size range from 50,000 ) 60,000 (lower than MQM estimates of 250,000 participants).

13. (SBU) MQM and PPP elected officials sat on a raised platform in front of the crowd as MQM leader Altaf Hussain addressed the gathering via telephone from London. PPP officials at the event included Sindh Chief Minister Syed Qaim Ali Shah, Sindh Provincial Assembly Speaker Nisar Khuhro, and Sindh Ministers Pir Mazhar-ul-Haq and Zulfiqar Mirza. MQM elected officials in attendance included MNAs Farooq Sattar and Haider Rizvi; Sindh Ministers Faisal Subzwari, Shaoib Bukhari and Raza Haroon; and, Federal Minister Babar Ghauri.

14. (C) During his address, Hussain offered MQM assistance to PML-N in preparing a legal case to contest the court ruling. He spoke at length about the need for national reconciliation while sharply criticizing the damage to Bhutto's monument and the burning of her photos. At the rally, MQM Deputy Convenor and MNA Farooq Sattar, the highest ranking MQM official in Pakistan, strongly condemned the attack on Bhutto's monument and "attempts to sabotage the reconciliatory process" in Pakistan. On March 2, Sattar told the CG that Hussain approved the rally concept during a meeting that Sattar attended in London earlier. According to Sattar, the motivation was to show solidarity with coalition partner PPP.

Possible Solutions?  
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15. (C) Sattar said the Supreme Court's disqualification of the Sharif brothers was a part of Pakistani politics and explained that most politicians have had similar problems. Such rulings are reversible, he said, but PML-N has to "fulfill the formality" of having the decision overturned. He said this was hard for Sharif to accept because, unlike others, Punjabi leaders had not had to face this sort of issue before.

16. (C) Sattar said Sharif could either accept MQM and PPP's

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offer to work with PML-N in filing a review petition with the Supreme Court or ask parliament put aside the conviction. The latter option would only require a simple majority of both the national Assembly and the Senate, but Sattar suggested that a 2/3 majority would be more publicly acceptable. Sattar believed MQM and PPP could garner enough support in both houses for such an affirmative vote. He said he asked MQM MNAs on March 1 to meet with PML-N MNAs and discuss this option, but did not believe the meeting had been set up yet.

17. (C) Sindh Assembly Speaker Nisar Khuhro (PPP) was bluntly critical of Nawaz Sharif's support of protest rallies. However, he told Post that he believed the country needed a new National Reconciliation Ordinance that would presumably cover Nawaz Sharif's hijacking and corruption convictions and Shahbaz Sharif's disqualification over reasons that appear unclear, but could include a loan default.

March 12 Lawyer's March  
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18. (C) Sattar tried to allay concerns that the PML-N supported "Lawyer's March," scheduled to begin in Karachi on March 12, could turn violent. He said he did not expect any interference from MQM, PPP or the Awami National Party (ANP), but cautioned that Jamaat Islami (JI) could cause trouble. He said that, if President Zardari approved, Prime Minister Gilani might join the marchers for a short time in Karachi to demonstrate that the group has the right to a peaceful demonstration. Sattar agreed to ask the Sindh Home Minister to meet with JI leaders in advance of the march to discourage violence by JI party activists.

19. (C) Sindh JI President Asadullah Bhutto told Post on March 5 that, while JI supported the lawyers march, the party had decided not to participate in it. This apparently reversed a February 25 statement by national JI President Qazi Hussain Ahmed indicating that JI planned to participate in the march. Bhutto added that he did not expect any violence, at least not on the part of JI supporters.

MQM Solution for the Judiciary

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¶10. (C) Sattar said MQM would support requiring all judges who took the oath of office under Musharraf's November 2007 provisional constitution order (PCO) to resign. To replace them, the legislature would pass a constitutional amendment requiring all Chief Justices, including from the High Courts, to be nominated by an independent commission. He said MQM has given this idea to PML-N MNAs to pass to Nawaz Sharif and requested that Ambassador Holbrook also pass his suggestion to him. If PML-N agrees, Sattar stated, MQM is willing to "pave the way".

Comment  
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¶11. (C) During his conversation with the CG, Sattar was most likely voicing the opinion of MQM leader Altaf Hussain, who lives in self-imposed exile in London. In trying to appease PPP, while at the same time attempting to play peacemaker with PML-N, MQM may be using Pakistan's latest turmoil in a bid to step visibly onto the national stage. A closer relationship with oft-rival PPP could position MQM for more or higher profile federal ministry slots. Helping PML-N could keep the door open for reconciliation, should that party come to power in the future.  
FAKAN